PLANET X

Hot tears were running down her pale cheeks. Trisha hadn't been out in the sun for a year now. Yes, it was a year ago that the spaceship Hope had launched off into deep space. They were the last hope of humanity in finding a hospitable planet, one they could call home when Earth could no longer support their needs. And that would be soon. Too soon, if you asked Trisha. Her younger brother, Jake, didn't seem upset at all that they were in space with just their parents along and a few vital crew members. Maybe it was because he didn't have any friends back home on Earth, unlike her….

Trisha missed her friends and especially Kevin, a bad boy whom she was secretly in love with. But he never paid any attention to her. She wasn't even sure what it was that she liked so much about him, maybe the fact that he was unapproachable ….

This evening she was crying with no real reason, she just felt like it. Well, truth be told, she wished she had stayed home. This journey was taking too long and the computer on board still couldn't find a match. No planet had what it took to support life. If this trip, this search was going to take too long they would have to make a big decision, at least that's what the captain, her father, had told her mom. They would either risk it and go on, hoping to find a planet that would match their needs, or go back home empty-handed while they still had fuel. That

would mean it had all been in vain. Which was unacceptable in her opinion.

She was wiping her tears when she heard a knock on her cabin door. She decided to pretend she was asleep, she wasn't in the mood for anyone. She had rather scroll photos on her phone when she realized that maybe they were the reason behind her tears. They reminded her of everything she used to have and was now so far away from her, all her friends, maybe lost forever. Then she heard the door handle and she saw her brother Jake in the door. She immediately threw a pillow at him and hit his head.

“What are you doing, Trish!?” he said without being upset at her at all.

“Isn’t it obvious!? I'm reading a book” she lied to her brother while trying to put a faint smile on her face.

“Then why have you been crying?” he went on as he was standing next to her.

“I have not! Mind your own business, Jake. What do you want?”

“I was wondering…do you think we will find it soon, Trish? Our new home? I'm getting tired of this spaceship, not that it isn’t' great and everything, but I want out….”

“I’m sure we will, Jake” she lied to give him hope, although she didn’t believe her own words, but she had put her heart in them to make him believe them. They had to have hope, if they lost that, then…

“Do you think we will find unicorns there, Trish?”

“You are being silly now, Jake. Let's hope we will find vegetation and water. As for the animals, I have no idea, Jake. Anything is possible I guess…”

“I’ll ask dad if he thinks we will find a suitable planet soon. Talk to you soon, Trish!”

And Jake was out of the room before she could say anything. She hoped he wouldn’t be too disappointed when their parents would tell him that there was still no such planet in their range. She too wished to feel the warmth of the sun on her skin, the wind through her hair, the rain on her face, but all that seemed so far away now that it almost hurt. She picked up her phone again and decided to listen to some music until she would fall asleep.

About two hours later she was half asleep when she thought she heard someone call her name. She was too tired and bored to open her eyes so she decided to ignore whatever that had been and just let herself fall asleep while listening to her favorite songs. Nope, now she was sure, her brother was calling her name and he seemed…. excited or ….maybe scared? She wasn't sure which, so she woke up. Not that she had really been asleep, just drowsed off a bit.

“Trisha, come on the deck right now!!! Mom and dad have something to tell you, or better said, to show you! Come!” He said and grabbed her right hand and pulled her out of the bed before she even had time to react.

“What!!!?” She finally said as they were going down the corridor towards the deck.

“You won’t believe this, Trish!! Mum and dad have really found it!!!”

“What??????? What have they found, Jake?”

“Our home……” Jake said with watery eyes.

Trisha stopped on her tracks. “Uh….have I been asleep that long? I mean I only closed my eyes for a bit. You must be joking Jake and I am not in the mood!” she mumbled still sleepy and now irritated, too.

“Just come and see!” he said and almost pushed her on the deck. She couldn’t believe her own eyes. Her parents and the rest of the crew (engineers and other crewmen, 10 in total) were all there gazing in disbelief at the huge screen in front of them. She looked, too. Mesmerized, that's how she felt at that moment in her life. The screen showed a huge green planet that was sure to be vegetation, which meant it supported life, which meant something else: a new home!

Although Trish and Jake wished to descend on the planet as soon as possible, they were aware that their parents were right and that they had to run some tests first to see if it was safe and if the air was breathable. Bill, their dad, and Alicia, their mom, finally reckoned it was safe to land on the planet as there were no visible storms or other visible dangers. They had to find a good landing spot and then run some tests to see if they could breathe or whether they needed masks. For that they would use the drone, a very sophisticated gadget.

They mapped the surrounding area and landed in the middle of some field. Their scanners didn’t show any forms of life for miles, which was odd, bearing in mind all the lush vegetation. Then it was time to send the drone for some air and soil samples.

The drone also had a high quality camera on and all the crew members were watching the large screen for the images of what could turn out to be humanity's new and maybe only hope. All the colors

were so intense, they didn’t resemble anything they were familiar with. The green of the plants was so wonderful that Trish couldn’t really describe its hue. All the crew members were watching with hope and awe. And everything on this planet was huge, enormous. The drone stopped for air and soil samples and returned to the ship with the information.

Alicia, the scientist and also their mom, went to the lab to analyze the findings while keeping her fingers crossed. Everyone was waiting with anticipation, hoping for good news, hoping to find what they had been searching for: a new home, both for them as well as for the rest of the human race left back on a dying planet…. If things turned out OK, then they could send the information back to Earth with the itinerary so the rest could also come, not that there were many people left there anyway.

But first, this crew was supposed to live on this planet for a year, make sure it was safe, get to unlock its secrets, before sending for the rest of the human race which numbered about 100.000 people. Yep, that was all that was left after the nuclear war almost wiped out all life on Earth. Most of the people died because of severe radiation. Some of the ones that survived at first, got sick later, not enough to kill them, but enough to make their life a living hell and to make them wish they hadn't survived, either. Then, in 10 years after the end of the Great War, only these 100.000 people remained, they were the last of the human race. They had developed immunity and were healthy. But as vegetation and animals had also suffered, they were aware they had to find another planet to call home. Trish hoped this time they would do better, they wouldn’t destroy it and themselves along with it. She was sure that they had learned their lesson and if they could find a new home, they would treasure it more.

It was all up to this little crew to find a new home. And now that they had found a possibly inhabitable planet, they were all waiting anxiously for Alicia to give the verdict.

For untrained eyes, Alicia was calmly examining the samples. But her husband who was just behind her and who knew her better than anyone else, could see she was nervous. Bill could see the slight shiver of her hands while she was steadily handling the samples. He wanted to let her know that everything would be OK but he knew better, he knew that when she was tensed, best thing to do was leave her alone rather than add to her stress. He pretended he was working on something when in fact he was observing her closely as he was stressed out too. This planet could either be their salvation or their doom.

When Alicia read the results, Bill already knew!! They had found their home, the spark in her eyes said it before her lips did. They had been together for so long that most of the times they didn't even need words to understand each other. A look was enough.

10 minutes later all crew members were on deck, listening to their captain. The crew consisted of 6 men and 4 women, and of course, Trisha and Jake. There was Iaan, a middle-aged man, who was the ship's engineer, Mike, a short stout man with a pleasant character whose job was software maintenance and the other 4 men who were soldiers. Everybody had agreed before going on this mission that they needed military as they didn't know what they would find during their journey and they would probably need protection. Too bad they couldn't take more people aboard. But it had all been calculated, and these 14 people were all the ship could carry for the duration of the trip without endangering their lives as they needed food and oxygen. In case they didn't find a suitable planet, then the ship had to support life

until they could return to Earth. Fortunately, they didn't have to return as this planet seemed to be perfect…..

As for the 4 women, two were doctors, Camilla and Jessica. They couldn't have risked going on this journey with only one doc. If anything happened to one of them, then the other doc would have to be enough. The other two, Karina and Lily, were biologists.

"-This planet is our chance for a new beginning", Bill was saying as everyone was absorbing his words as soon as he spoke them. "Alicia 's results are more than promising. The concentration of oxygen is just like back on Earth. The soil is not contaminated. Everything looks OK. But even though our scanners haven't detected any heat from lifeforms, I want our soldiers with us as we are going to explore the surrounding. Well equipped, too. Remember, this is not Earth, we don't know what to expect. Jessica and Lily, I want you with us on this expedition too. We might need a doc with us, as for you, Lily, it's obvious we need your expertise. The others are to remain inside the ship till we return."

"What about us, dad!!?? We want to come too, you promised!" Trish said, looking at her brother to see if he agreed with her. She could see the disappointment in his eyes, so he wanted to come too.

"Not this time, Trish", Alicia uttered. "Let us make sure it's safe and then everyone can come on the next expedition, OK?"

But Trish wasn't listening anymore, she was too upset. She stormed out of the deck and back to her room, crying loudly as she lay on the bed.

“Come Bill, let's do this! Jessica, Lily, what do you say? Are you ready for an adventure?” Alicia addressed them with fiery passion in her, not sure what to expect to find on this new planet.

“Sure thing, ma'am, let's see what secrets lie ahead on this planet.” Jessica uttered with delight. The four soldiers were armed to the teeth, just in case, and were ready for the trip as well. Two of them went ahead and the other two stood behind the small procession to be able to protect them better, although they hoped their services wouldn’t be needed. Not that they couldn’t face the dangers but nobody wanted a confrontation. They were all hoping for a peaceful planet. They had all had enough violence back on Earth….

The small procession of eight was advancing slowly, paying maximum attention to their surrounding, not knowing what to expect. They were relieved that the air was breathable and they didn’t have to wear the oxygen masks.

Ricky and Steve, two of the four soldiers, were leading the procession, walking ahead of the rest. Then Bill and Alicia followed, then Jessica and Lily behind them and the other two soldiers, Max and Ted, at the rear. Everybody was amazed at the raw beauty that surrounded them. There were huge plants and trees everywhere and the smell….well, the smell was even better than anything they had ever smelled before, it was a mixture of sweetness and something that resembled chocolate. It was divine. But the four soldiers didn’t let that distract them, they were on high alert as they knew everyone else was counting on them.

Although the soldiers were armed to the teeth just in case, everyone else also had guns for their own protection. They were all on high alert even if the landscape was something else, something they had never seen on Earth. And everything was huge, a lot bigger than on Earth… They were like ants walking among those humongous plants so no wonder the smell was also very strong.

20 minutes later and still no life forms on sight. Nothing moved, not even the tiniest breeze, nothing was heard, only smelled. The interesting part was that there were no bugs, either. And the sun was scorching, tiring them even more.

Bill approached his wife and searched her face for any sign of what she was feeling. As he couldn't figure her out, he simply chose to ask her.

"Do you think we should head back? We've been wandering for hours now and no sign of life. And by the looks of it, the sun is going to set soon. And I wouldn't like to stroll around on an unknown planet during the night. We could resume our search first thing tomorrow morning, what do you think?" he asked her hoping she'd agree. But on the other hand, Bill knew he had married an adventurous, brave woman, and chances were that she wanted to push on for a little longer.

"I think you are right. I think we have gathered enough intel for our first day on this planet, at least regarding the vegetation. We can search more tomorrow." She said to his surprise, and then out loud for the whole team to hear:

"Ok, let's wrap it up guys, let's get back to the ship. Lily and Karina can study the flower samples back at the ship. And we can return tomorrow morning for more recon. Everybody agree?" she asked,

although she knew nobody would object, but appearances were important, they all had to feel at least as important as appearances, but she was the master mind of the operation and they all trusted and liked her. She was smart, brave and a very good leader, although her husband was the captain.

Ricky and Steve relaxed when they heard they were heading back and went ahead of the small procession again. Max and Ted, on the other hand, were still vigilant, their laser guns ready to defend the small group if circumstances required it.

Slowly but surely the sun went down and they soon found themselves in darkness. But they had lamps. However, it was not the same thing as daylight so everybody started to walk at a more speedy pace than when they came. And the ship was still not in sight. Suddenly, a faint buzz was heard in the distance. At first, nobody knew what to think. But as they were going towards the ship, the buzz got stronger and stronger, making them wonder what it was. They didn't have to wonder long, though, as the source of the noise soon came to them. Thousands of large insects were flying towards them and they didn't seem friendly.

“Looks like we're not alone, after all!!!” screamed Bill while looking terrified at the critters.

Ricky, their leading soldier, acted quickly. He took out his laser gun and started aiming for the bugs. The other three soldiers followed his lead while making a circle around the captain, his wife and the two scientists, Lily and Jessica. But the flying bugs were getting closer and although everybody shot at them, they didn't seem to dwindle their numbers.

“Let's make a run for the ship!! We don't stand a chance otherwise, they are too many. I haven't seen anything that could be used as a shelter on our way to the ship, so our only chance is the ship!! We have to get to the ship!! And pronto!” Alicia said clenching her teeth and thinking of her two kids whom she feared she might never see again because of some nasty bugs on this ….X planet! She couldn't think of a name for the planet so planet X was good enough.

“I’ll hold them back as long as I can, you run and save yourselves! It's the only way or no one will make it out alive. At least this way, the rest of you might get a chance, go!!” yelled Ricky while standing his ground and shooting like crazy right and left. Ted joined him.

“What? Do you think you'll get all the glory? I'll stand and fight, let them escape, they'll have even better chances. Now go, go, go, no time to quarrel about it or none will survive. And you have to warn the others. Go!!!”

The rest started running without looking back. Although their hearts were crying for not being able to help Ricky and Ted, they knew they'd all die if they stayed. And with them, the chances for saving the human race would have dimmed considerably. So they ran for their lives. But at night, even the plants seemed to want a piece of them, as if even the plants were hungry for their blood.

As they were running, they realized the bugs were somewhere behind, fighting the two brave soldiers. So they kept going. As they were running they felt the ground moving under their feet and then they fell….somewhere under ground. And curious enough, as they reached the ground, the trapdoor above them closed as they were falling.

They fell on soft ground. It hadn't been a long fall so nobody was hurt. But they were all scared. They had no idea what had just happened or where they were. All they knew was that they were somewhere underground. Bill was the first to speak.

“Is everyone ok?”

“Yeah….guess so. But I don't think Ricky or Ted are also ok. We left them there alone to face those darn things! They are probably dead by now!” said Alicia in a whisper as she didn't know if they were alone there.

“Then let's not waste their sacrifice, let's find a way out. Or their sacrifice will be in vain. Let's find a way out….” Whispered Lily, a small tear rolling down her cheek. She quickly wiped it although nobody had seen it in that darkness.

“Wise words, Lily. We'll find a way out. Let's look around for any signs of life. For all we know, we could run into other creatures here. So everybody stay alert and do as little noise as possible. We only have Steve and Max to protect us now. But we also have guns, not laser guns, true, but guns nonetheless. Let's make our bullets count, don't shoot unless you have to. Understood?” Bill asked them in a confident voice, although Alicia knew that his confidence was just for show.

They got up and looked around. They were in a huge hall, there were led lights from place to place. When they got over the initial shock, they saw those dim lights on the walls! So this planet was inhabited!! There were smart beings somewhere , they had electricity! They weren't alone!! But were the beings harmless or aggressive? Were they in more danger underground than above ground, facing those critters??

They didn't know but they were sure they'd soon find out. There were also pipes on the walls and they could also see some kind of door

at the end of the hall. When they got near it, they all examined it closely and carefully before deciding whether to try and open it or head back and face the bugs.

As they were still debating what to do, the strange looking metal door opened and there was a better lit corridor in front of them. Still no aliens though. Uhh, although they were in fact the aliens, not the inhabitants of this …X planet. They had come from a dying planet looking for another planet that could support life. And this one could. And it did already. There wad life here already. All they had to do now was to find out if these life forms, these beings, were friendly or not.

“So….who wants to go through lucky door number 1? Any volunteers!?” Lily said jokingly.

As no one answered, she went on: “Guess nobody is eager to, but we can't just stand here. And my guess is we have a better chance here than up there” she said, pointing above her head.

“Max and I will go first, the rest follow us!” muttered Steve but his voice wad strangled with emotion. Although Alicia wondered why as he knew before he came on this journey that if they wanted to find a planet that could sustain life, then it probably did already. What did he expect? A welcoming party? But she didn't say anything out loud, she was content to keep it to herself.

So Steve and Max went ahead followed closely by Bill, Alicia, then Lily and Jessica.

As they reached the end of the corridor, another door popped open in front of them. This time, they passed through it without hesitation. But…..

As they entered the next room, their jaws dropped, figuratively, of course. They were still in one piece. Ten tall creatures were standing in front of them, as if they had been waiting for them. They were slender, but muscular. No fats on their bodies. Only muscles. They were humanoid like, but the first thing that came to their minds was that they had no body hair at all. And their eyes were large, deep and crystal clear. They had some sort of costumes on, but they had never seen such fabrics before, they were simple, yet gave them a certain elegance. And the aliens didn't seem to have any weapons on them, none that were obvious anyway.

Steve raised his laser gun but Bill quickly put his hand on his gun and lowered his arm.

“Are you trying to start a war? Although I think the word is not quite fit as we can at most start a squabble, as we are only six of us. They are ten in this room, but who knows how many of them there are in the next rooms? And let's try to see how things stand first!”

Steve lowered his gun although it was against everything he believed in. How could he protect them if the captain didn't let him?

But then one of the aliens spoke…or better said addressed them, as his lips never moved. But they could all hear and understand him as clear as daylight.

“Who are you? Where have you come from? And most importantly, what do you want? And don't even think about lying, because we will know….”

They looked at each other in awe. Lots of thoughts crossed their minds, but they agreed to let Bill do the talking. He took a step forward and addressed the strange looking creatures:

“Hello…we are humans and we've come a long way from Earth, our dying planet, to find a new home. Two of our friends were attacked by some weird flying bugs and we fell through a sort of trapdoor and we got here. We mean you no harm….”

At which point they could all hear a ripple of laughter coming from the aliens. Although their lips still didn't move, they were sure they had heard them laughing at them.

“YOU mean us no harm? Don't make us laugh, humans…though you already made us laugh. Not you, nor your weapons can harm us. You'd all be dead before you could even raise your petty weapons against us. Don't be fooled by our appearance or lack of weapons. We don't need conventional weapons if we want to kill you. But we are supreme beings, beyond such savagery. When one of your humans raised his weapon, we knew he wouldn't go any further or else he wouldn't be standing right now. Our minds ARE our weapons…and trust me, nothing you have can match that. As for your friends, we tried to save them but we were too late. The Guki, those flying insects, got to them first. You were lucky. We opened a trapdoor for you and here you are. You will be safe with us till morning when you can get out and return to your ship. By the way, we call ourselves the Pukori.”

They were all astonished. Alicia felt like this conversation needed a woman's touch, so took control, she took the reins of the conversation into her hands.

“Nice to meet you, Pukori. If you are as strong as you say, and I have no doubt whatsoever that you are, then it means you will let us live on your planet. Otherwise, you would have killed us. Am I right?”

After a long pause, their leader spoke (telepathically) again. Although his tone was calm and steady, there was also determination in it. What he was saying was like a verdict which they all had to accept.

“Yes….you may live alongside us. We will teach you our ways and how to survive here on our planet. You and the other few humans on the ship. But that's it. Nobody else from your home planet is welcome. You said your planet is dying and we've read your minds, we've seen your memories…. Our planet is our own! And we will protect it. Yours is still a savage, primitive race and we fear if more came to our planet, they'd only do the same thing here….We are sorry…or better said, we are not sorry to tell the truth, but they are not welcome. As for you and your companions, as you are already here, you are welcome to stay as long as you adapt…and follow a few simple rules! The most important one is no killing, us (which you won't even be able to), or each other. We are peaceful beings (unless provoked) and we want it to stay that way. Now Mika (and he pointed towards one of their own) will join you back to the ship to make sure you make it in one piece. But in the morning. Now you are welcome to accompany us to the main hall to dine and then rest till morning. It's the safest way.”

With that, they followed the Pukori to the main hall….

Trish was already worried sick. Her parents and the rest of the crew still hadn't returned from the expedition and Jake was also a nuisance. He wanted to take a gun and go look for their parents. But that was foolish, he was just a kid. She wasn't much older either, she was only 19 and he was 15. And they had no idea what was out there. Or who. No matter how much she hated it, she was aware that the best thing they could do, at least for now, was to wait for their return. She was sure they were ok. They had to be….

Finally, when a few more hours passed and still nobody returned, she changed her mind. Enough was enough. She grabbed a laser gun and went to grab her brother, too.

"So….what's the plan, Trish!?" Jake said eyeing his sister.

" First of all we'll need to stay alive if we want to save them. So whatever you do, don't do anything stupid, OK?"

"Ok, Trish. Let's do this. But how are we going to find them??"

"I've placed a tracking device on mom's satchel. It shows they are about a mile ahead , somewhere below, but they haven't moved since they got there. They must be in some kind of trouble. Stay behind me and pay attention to everything around us. Keep your gun close and ready to fire."

"Yeah…"was all Jake said as the adrenaline rushed into him. He couldn't really describe what he was feeling. It was a mixture of feelings…but most of all he felt he had to prove his worth to his parents by saving their lives if they were in danger.

It was early in the morning and the rest of the crew hadn't noticed their departure. Trish guessed they had about two hours until the rest

would realize they were gone. They'd probably set out to look for them but Trish hoped it wouldn't come to that. She hoped they'd be able to save their parents and the others without putting everyone's lives at stake.

Trish and Jake were mesmerized at the beauty and purity of this planet. It was all so big and the plants were so colorful. Which made her wonder about any possible life forms. But her heat detectors didn't show anything, which was odd. She was sure there had to be life on this planet. It just meant they hadn't found it yet.

Jake stopped to look at a big orange flower with even bigger thorns. He wanted to touch the petals but his sister stopped him just in time.

"What do you think you are doing, Jake? It's not safe."

"I just…."Jake babbled but then he dropped it. She was right, there was no point in arguing. They knew nothing about this planet and the dangers lurking there. So for now he was going to be content with just admiring its beauties from a safe distance.

Half an hour later they were standing exactly above the tracking device.

"They are somewhere underground. Let's look for a way in. There must be something…."Trish said scanning the surrounding area carefully. There was a lot of vegetation and no visible way to go under. At least not yet. 15 minutes later it was getting frustrating.

Then Jake saw it, the trapdoor.

"This must be it!" he said, hope in his voice.

But no sooner had he uttered the words that the trapdoor opened and they fell inside. Trish was first back up on her feet. It took her a moment or two for her eyes to get accustomed to the dim light. She

fumbled for her brother in the semi darkness without taking her eyes off the silhouettes she could make out in the far corner of the hall they were in.

“Get up! Now, Jake! We’re not alone….” She said right before the 10 slender figures arrived next to them. She raised her gun and pushed Jake behind her, trying to protect him. It was her fault he was there instead of being safe on the ship and if anything happened to him, she would never forgive herself.

“Who are you and what have you done with our parents? We know they are here!!” she screamed from the bottom of her lungs while examining the strange creatures. There was something about them that was oddly calming though and what immediately struck her was the fact that they had no weapons, which could mean only two things: they were either very stupid or very confident. Everything about them told her it was the latter. So she instinctively put down her weapon while waiting for the answer. Jake, however, poked her in the back and whispered in her ear “what are you doing, Trish??!” .

“Trust me” was all she whispered back.

Meanwhile, in another tunnel, the other aliens were bringing food for their guests. The dining hall was better lit than the rest of the underground chambers and a lot larger. There were stone tables and stools everywhere. All stools had some sort of cushions made of dry plants so they wouldn't be hard or cold to the touch. Alicia stood next to her husband while Steve sat next to Lily and Max next to Jessica. They were all seated and waiting for the food, wondering what that would be like.

During all this time, hundreds of other aliens gathered in the dining hall. They all entered quietly and took their seats. Some of them cast a few glances towards them as for the Pukori, they were the aliens. Alicia thought of how humans would have reacted to aliens among them had the situation been different. They would have probably brought in the army who would have captured them for study and maybe experiments…yeah….maybe the rest of the human race was better off on Earth…

All this time the Pukori were silent. When all were seated, their leader entered the room. His garments were different from everybody else's. His clothes were even plainer that what everybody else was wearing. He was wearing two thick bracelets on his wrists that had shiny gems encrusted in them. The gems sent sparks around the room and seemed to be changing color from time to time, which Alicia thought was kind of odd. It was pretty obvious that he was the leader of the Pukori and just like everybody else, he was unarmed.

He took a seat in the middle of the room, among his people. It was a simple stone table, just like everybody else had. Nothing out of the ordinary for him, he was the symbol of decency in everybody's opinion.

Then he addressed them but not telepathically, but in the old fashioned way.

"Greetings….humans. I am Suku, leader of the Pukori. These 35 Pukori" he said while pointing towards all the Pukori who had meanwhile gathered in the dining hall "are the last of our species. We are a dying race….and as I gather, you have a dying planet back home. So you are welcome to stay here and learn from us. Our alliance might prove fruitful for both of us. Our planet is rich in minerals, precious stones, vegetation, all you can think of. But all of us are very old, over two hundred years old each. The youngest is 205 years old, my right

hand man, as you would put it, Mako. And we are all males. The last female of our species died more than a hundred years ago. We live a peaceful, uneventful life here. Undisturbed so far. The Guki are the insects that attacked you outside. Besides ourselves, they are the only other living creatures here. Four hundred years ago a nuclear war broke out on our planet between the people of the Jobi for supremacy. We hid here in these tunnels while they fought their war. They were all extinguished by the end of it, as well as most of our people who couldn't take cover in time. Our planet recovered well and fast, but the Pukori kept dying. The 35 you see here in these halls are the last of us….” He said and Alicia thought she could see sadness on his face. But then he recomposed himself and a minute later he was inviting everyone to dine.

Food was served in wooden bowls and plates and it was all vegan, of course. Alicia was the first to dig in while the others watched her, a bit reluctant. But to her surprise, the food was really tasty. A minute later, they were all eating peacefully. Suddenly, 10 of the Pukori slipped out of the room to return ten minutes later accompanied by Trish and Jake.

“Mom, dad!” both kids cried and headed towards their surprised parents.

“We've been worried sick about you and all the while you've been making friends and having dinner!?” Trish said, faking a grin.

“What are you two doing here? Why aren't you back in the ship? Haven't I told you to wait? Do you know how dangerous it is for the two of you to wander alone on an unknown planet?.....” Alicia said clearly worried but then she added in a softer tone: “Well, if you are here, I guess you can join us for dinner”.

Bill chuckled because he was in fact proud of his two brave kids. They reminded him of himself when he was young and reckless…About a lifetime ago, he thought to himself.

Later that day, they were all back safely at the ship, all except the two soldiers…

"What do you think, Alicia? About everything…" Bill was asking his wife later that evening when they were finally alone in their quarters. "Do you think we can make a home here with those Guki flying around every night?" he went on pensively.

"This means two things", she answered, "either we kill them or we only travel and build and work during the day…constantly worrying about them. But how could we kill them if the Pukori weren't able to?" she added almost in a whisper.

"Maybe they got used to living mostly underground, who knows? Or perhaps they are just too old to have any fight left in them. Maybe they've seen too much death already. Either way, we are willing to fight or die for a better life.", she said while putting on her pyjamas and preparing for a well deserved sleep after such an eventful day.

She was grateful they were back safe and her two kids were also safe but as for the two members of their crew, Ricky and Ted, they were lost forever, poor souls. They had made it so far, they had managed to reach this distant planet just to die on the first day they put foot on it. It was sad, she thought while already falling asleep…

“What do you say we explore our new playground a bit, Jake? Everybody is busy measuring, testing and working that they won't even miss us….Please, I'm bored but most of all, I'm curious about this place. We haven't seen much yesterday as we went down the rabbit hole so to say….” Trish was almost begging her brother as she didn't want to go alone. It was a new land, in fact it was a whole new planet, so even her annoying brother's company was better than none at all. But the fact that she had to beg, well that was beneath her, but new planet, new rules. It wasn't like there was anyone here to mock her, they were the only kids here and the adults didn't care. So neither did she.

“Well sis, I never knew you liked me so much…” he teased her as he also knew what was going on in her head but the truth was he also wanted to explore this new land. And anyway, as long as they' d be back before sundown, he was sure nobody would notice their absence. Not even their parents.

She grabbed her little leather bag with a few snacks and two bottles of water and saw her brother putting something in a hurry in his own bag. She didn't pay much attention to it as she was eager to leave the ship and go exploring.

When they got far enough from the ship, they slowed their pace and really looked around. Everything was huge. All vegetation was humongous. Now they could see there were insects everywhere but nothing resembled the perilous Guki. The Guki were the size of pigeons…pigeons that had gone to the gym for a year or so…..

Anyway, they agreed not to touch anything for now and only observe. They still had a lot to learn from the Pukori about this planet. Their planet. But now it was going to be their planet as well.

After a little chat with her brother, they agreed that they should look for a source of fresh water. Water was essential so if they could find a spring or maybe a brook, that would be of great help and then they wouldn't return empty handed. They walked like that for miles until Jake got really tired. Not that Trish wasn't tired too, but she wasn't going to admit it before her brother did. It had been her idea to go exploring so she thought she didn't have the right to complain before him, so she clenched her teeth and went on until Jake finally asked her for a break. Although it was music to her ears, out loud she said:

"Ok Jakey, if you are tired already…I guess we can have a little break. We can sit on this stump of a tree or whatever it is until we compose ourselves, I mean until you recover…"she said blushing before she could turn her head so he wouldn't see it. Too late.

"Oh come on, sis, I know you're just as tired so stop pretending." He said laughing not at her, but with her. He loved his sister and their parents. They were everything he had and in fact, everything that mattered. And not just because they were here on this God forsaken planet, but his family had always meant everything to him. Nothing else really mattered. And he was sure each of them felt exactly the same.

"Let's grab a snack while we're at it, Jake. I'm hungry" said Trish in a low voice although her thermo gears didn't show any living creature nearby. Still, there was something that didn't feel right. But as they decided to have a rest, they could just as well have a bite, too.

Then all of a sudden, black heavy clouds gathered above them. It was scary. And it all happened before they could even finish their snacks. They packed everything and got up looking for shelter. All the vegetation around them started to rustle and to wave in the wind. That only added to the already spooky scenario. It was like in an old stupid horror movie. "Lame", Trish thought to herself as she giggled out loud.

“Do you think those clouds are funny, Trish? Or do you know something that I don't? Cause now would be the time to share…” uttered Jake while holding his breath. He was scared.

“Uh, no, sorry, it was stupid now that I think of it, I just thought that it's like in the movies…but nevermind that, let's find shelter quick. It's too late and too far to try to make it back.”

By the time she finished her sentence, it had started raining. It was pouring down, soaking them to the bones. As they were running and trying to avoid the large plants and also trying not to trip over, Jake drew a rope from his backpack and tied it to his sister so they wouldn't get lost. He tied it to her belt. It made it a bit more difficult to make their way through the high grass and large leaves and thorny flowers but they had to find shelter.

Due to the black clouds above their heads, it soon got pretty dark. Trish was glad her brother had the idea with the rope, she didn't want to lose her brother.

They struggled on through the pouring rain and then they could also hear thunder everywhere. As the vegetation was too high and the rain and wind and thunder made it impossible for them to hear anything else, Trish fell from where they were and was now hanging in the air and yelling at her brother to stop. But he couldn't hear her and they both fell from the cliff….splashing into the river below. Well, at least they found water…

“I don't like the look of those clouds….they look as scary as back on Earth on a really bad weather. Let's wrap everything up and return to the ship” Alicia ordered the crew and Bill agreed.

Five minutes later, they were all onboard. All except Trish and Jake, of course. As the weather was bad, Alicia went to Jake's quarters to comfort him. She seemed to forget that he wasn't five anymore. Anyway, when he was little, he was terrified of storms so she would always comfort him. And now probably because they were on an unknown planet Alicia felt the urge to check on him again although he was a teenager now. But to her, he was still that little scared boy….until she discovered that neither of her kids were on board the ship…then she was scared.

The fall seemed to take forever until they hit the water. It was all foggy below them and they couldn't see anything. They thought they'd fall on the ground and die. So they were relieved when they fell in the river. Luckily, it didn't have whirls or torrents. It was flowing slowly and they could easily swim to the shore. And once again Trish thanked the stars that her brother had tied himself to her. Otherwise, she didn't even want to think how far apart from one another they could have ended up.

“Let’s pay more attention this time, Trish, please, I don't want another bath…” was the first thing Jake said when they reached the bank of the river.

“Yeah….”she answered apologetically as she had slipped over the cliff, dragging him after her. Truth is, she hadn't expected it and all those huge leaves hanging everywhere just made it worse. Not to say about the heavy rain…

“We still need to find shelter” she quickly added afterwards.

“Yeah, well, how about you let me lead this time, sis!?”

“Be my guest” she answered, pouting at him.

“You know I saw that, Trish” he said slowly.

“I don't care” was her answer, but they were in fact both just glad to be alive, at least for now, anyway, they thought.

The mist was dense all around them and they couldn't distinguish anything in front of them. It fact it was so bad that they weren't even sure if they were advancing at all or walking in circles. An hour later, exhausted, Jake fell in front of his sister. He just felt he couldn't take another step. All his muscles were tensed. Even his mind seemed to be numb.

“Get your lazy ass up, Jake! Now! We have to find shelter or we'll die. We can't wander around like this through this fog. We are soaking wet and we could fall again or who knows what else might happen. So I won't have it, you hear me? Get up!!”

She didn't want to yell at her brother but he needed a reality call. And the pitch of her voice that showed him just how serious she was seemed to have done the trick. He was up on his feet in the next few seconds.

“Geez sis, who died and made you chief? I'm up, ok, let's go….” He mumbled but the thing remained that he got up and started walking again.

“Talking of which, follow me, I see something ahead. Or rather I don't see, which means that the pitch dark thing over there might just be a cave. Let's see. It's not that far, look!” she said while taking the lead again.

She was right. It was a cave. They both entered carefully and then she git a flashlight out of her bag. She looked around. It was a spacious cave, I mean it was large but the ceiling was pretty low. She quickly checked her thermo gear but everything seemed ok. Nothing in there. No Guki or anything large. And anyway, hadn’t the Pukori said that they had nothing to fear besides the Guki?

“Ok, we'll have to make a fire and dry our clothes and get warm. Also we'll have to spend the night here, Jake. There's no way we can get back to the ship through this fog and storm. There's just no way. I'm so sorry. Our parents will be so mad at us when they find out we're missing.”

“Do you have your phone, Trish? I lost mine in the river.”

“Let me check.” She said while fumbling through her stuff. Then with a grin on her face, she showed him the phone. But the victory was short lived as she saw water dripping from it. Her grin swiftly turned to sorrow. She almost cried.

“Well, it was worth to try”, Jake said just as disappointed.

“Shut up, Jake. It's not like I expected it to get wet or fall into a freaking river!”

“You’re right sis, sorry for snapping at you like that. But hey….we found water!!! And plenty of it! And fresh! I can vouch for it! I tasted it. It was pretty good.”

“You did what now??” she screamed, terrified for a moment.

“Relax, Trish (he called her by her name this time to show her that he was in earnest), I'm not dead, am I? So, as I was saying, the water is good. Let's just leave it, ok?” he said while patting her shoulder.

She felt embarrassed for how she reacted. She hugged her brother and gave a deep sigh. Half an hour later they were warming themselves next to a cozy fire that was crackling in the cave, pushing away the darkness. Another half an hour later they were fast asleep next to the fire. As to when and where they woke up, that's another story…..

“I tracked down Trish's phone! Let's go find our children!!” Bill exclaimed triumphantly.

Alicia was trembling nervously as it was dark already which meant one thing: the Guki.

Before leaving, Bill told the rest of the crew to hold the fort till their return. When they were about to exit the ship, the two soldiers were standing in the door, armed to the teeth and looking determined and ready to fight. Bill' s first thought was mutiny.

“What in the name of God does this mean!?” Bill said, his hand already pushing his wife back to protect her. She was just as astonished and her eyes betrayed the fear that was in her heart. Not necessarily for them, but this was not the time. They had to save their kids.

“We're coming with you, chief. You will need all the help you can get. And don't say otherwise because….” But Steve didn't get to finish his sentence because Bill patted his shoulder and relaxed.

“Man, you almost gave me a heart attack. Let's go men, and thank you!” he said relieved and grateful. Alicia couldn't believe what just happened, either. She relaxed her hand from her hidden pocket gun.

Trish was the first to wake up. She was still dizzy. She looked around confused. They weren't in the cave they had fallen asleep in. And they weren't alone….

End of part 1. Will start working on part two soon.

<u>And ……..LET’S GO BRANDON!!!(FJB)</u>

God bless us all !

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